

PRATHAM BOOKS
A Book in Every Child's Hand

The Elephant Bird

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Level 3



Munia knew that the giant, one-feathered elephant bird had not swallowed the horse. Yes, he was big enough to swallow a horse, but that didn't mean he had! The village of Adhania had only one horse-cart pulled by the two horses Vayu and Drut. And Vayu had gone missing near the lake in the jungle where the bird lived.

The villagers had known about the elephant bird for generations.



He was the last of his race, which was considered extinct for hundreds of years. The world did not know that the living relic of that race, who had lost all his feathers but one, still roamed the jungles of Adhania.

The bird and the villagers kept a safe distance from each other. But not Munia. Although she walked with a limp, she was brave of heart. She often slipped into the jungle to watch the elephant bird.



The elephant bird came near the lake in the daytime to bask in the sun or play in the lake alone splashing water. Sometimes he sat half-submerged in water. At other times there was no trace of him.

Perhaps he just rested in some corner of the dense jungle. He stood as tall as a tree. He had a long strong neck, huge legs with claws and a heavy spear-like head. His long talons and nails looked scary.



But Munia soon realised he was a shy herbivorous bird. He just munched on leaves by the lakeside.

Munia felt she had something in common with him. The elephant bird could not fly and Munia could not run! Other village children mocked her limp and did not include her in their games. That was why she liked staying alone.



Every morning Munia helped fetch three pitchers of water from the village well, and collected wood so that Amma could light the stove. And then she would be out for a long time. Amma believed she went out to play with the kids. Little did she know that Munia went into the jungle to the lake where the elephant bird lived.



One day, gathering courage, Munia stepped in the open near the lake. Without turning his head the elephant bird rolled his eyes towards Munia and then closed them, uninterested by her advance.

Getting no more attention than the flies buzzing over his head, Munia stomped her feet. Suddenly the elephant bird lifted one of his claws. Munia cried and fell headlong into the shallow waters of the lake. She came out drenched to see him shaking all over. He was laughing!



“That’s funny, huh?” she asked angrily and turned to leave. Before Munia had walked away from the clearing, something hit her feet. It was a fruit that the elephant bird had thrown at her. The elephant bird wanted to play! Hesitantly, Munia threw it at him. He trotted sideways and caught the fruit in his beak. Thus, Munia’s friendship with the elephant bird had begun. And just when she had finally found a friend, Vayu had gone missing! And everyone’s suspicion had turned towards the elephant bird.



After searching for Vayu high and low, the villagers gathered under the old banyan tree.Everyone agreed that there could be no thief in Adhania. They all trusted one another. The milkman swore that he had seen Vayu gallop away towards the lake. “There is no sign of Vayu anywhere. It must be something in the jungle that got him,” a villager addressed the headman. “Who else can it be but the giant one-feathered elephant bird? He must be destroyed!” said the milkman. “For years he has been lying silent, hatching his evil plans!”



The crowd agreed. Munia watched the proceedings quietly. She wanted to speak, but was scared of being punished for speaking up. Even if she spoke, who would believe her? “Yes, all these years of aimless living has made the giant dangerous,” said Munia’s father. “Today it is a horse, tomorrow it may be our children…”

The headman spoke over the villagers’ angry shouts, “Brothers, even though we are facing a giant, we have the strength of numbers. So let us go out and finish him!”



A cheer of approval went up. “The elephant bird did not eat the horse,” Munia said softly but firmly, limping forward. “I was with him when Vayu went missing!” A heavy silence fell on the gathering. “What does this mean?” roared the headman. “That the elephant bird is my friend, and he has not done this!”

“This girl has lost her mind!” shouted someone from the back. The other children laughed. “He only eats leaves! How can he eat Vayu?” Munia shouted, not moving from her place.



“You can’t even plait your hair and you are giving us advice?” Munia’s father fumed and came towards her. “Go play with your friends!”

“This elephant bird is the only friend I have,” said Munia. Her father glared at her. But she didn’t cry and stood there facing the villagers.

“Forget about the girl, we will get the elephant bird in the morning,” said the headman and the gathering dispersed.



Munia had only one night to prove the elephant bird's innocence. "Think, Munia, think!" she whispered to herself. "The milkman saw Vayu gallop away on the road that goes to the lake. But the road takes a turn before it reaches the lake and goes towards Chandesara. What if Vayu had gone that way?"

Munia's parents were angry with her and sent her to bed without speaking a word. Once they were asleep, she got out of bed, took the hanging lamp and stepped out of the house.



She crossed Adhania, and came to the jungle path leading to Chandesara, the neighbouring village. Whoooo... rang the call of an owl in the jungle air. A jackal howled from a distance. The shadows of trees moved like long dark fingers. She hesitated for a moment but then thought of the elephant bird sleeping peacefully in the jungle. If she didn't do something to solve the mystery, the elephant bird may not be alive to see the next night. She took a deep breath and limped alone on the jungle path in the dead of the night.



The next morning the villagers gathered near the lake with sticks, sharp stones and long kitchen knives. The elephant bird was resting when the crowd approached him. The sun shone on his featherless back. He got up slowly and stared at the crowd. Looking at his size, the villagers stopped at some distance. After a moment’s hesitation the headman cried, “Be ready!” The mob roared, firming the grip on the weapons, ready to run down the giant one-feathered elephant bird.



“Stop!” Munia’s thin voice cut through the din. She limped between the mob and the giant.

“Munia! Come back at once!” her father ordered. “Grab her!” cried someone else.

Munia’s father and another villager rushed towards her. The elephant bird advanced a couple of steps and they stopped. “Okay… if this is how you want it, we’ll tackle both of you together!” yelled a man, holding a spear.



“What’s going on?” someone shouted from behind the crowd. A slightly hunched man with a long beard came in holding a horse’s reins.

The headman asked with a surprised look, “Saarthi, what are you doing here? And why is Vayu with you?”



“Oh, as you know, I had sold Vayu to you some years back. Yesterday I was passing by your village early in the morning in my buggy pulled by Jhabru and Ghabru – Vayu’s brothers. I don’t know how Vayu got loose and followed us back to Chandesara! I couldn’t recognize him and didn’t know what to do with him until this morning when I saw this little girl going from hut to hut, asking about a lost horse. But what is going on?” he asked again.



The villagers did not answer Saarthi. They hung their heads in shame. Munia’s father went to her, lifted her in his arms and took her back to the village. Since that day, no child laughed at Munia’s limp. They all wanted to be friends with her. And they all wanted to be friends with the elephant bird.

Munia’s tale reached many villages and the villagers in faraway hamlets whispered to each other, “Munia knew that the giant one-feathered elephant bird had not swallowed the horse!”



This story is inspired by the real Elephant Bird (scientific name: Aepyornis maximus), the biggest bird that walked our planet. It inhabited the island of Madagascar. With more and more settlements on the island, and more forests ruined, the species became extinct around 1700 CE.

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The Elephant Bird
(English)

Munia Knew that the giant one-feathered elephant bird had not swallowed the horse, even though he was big enough to swallow one! So where had the horse disappeared? A story about a magical bird, and a brave and curious child.

This is a Level 3 book for children who are ready to read on their own.

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